

Television Histories

Shaping
Collective Memory
in the Media Age

Edited by
Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins

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1 History TV and Popular Memory

Steve Anderson

A remarkable and misguided consensus exists among both historians and media critics regarding television's unsuitability for the construction of history. Notwithstanding The History Channel's promise to provide access to "All of History—All in One Place," Television viewers are often characterized as victims in an epidemic of cultural amnesia for which television is both disease and carrier. TV, so the argument goes, can produce no lasting sense of history; at worst, it actually impedes viewers' ability to receive, process, or remember information about the past. Raymond Williams's theorization of the "flow" of televisual discourse is invoked to argue that the contents of television simply rush by like answers on the *Jeopardy!* board without context or opportunity for retention. Film theorist Stephen Heath agrees, proposing that television "produces forgetfulness, not memory, flow, not history. If there is history, it is congealed, already past and distant and forgotten other than as television archive material, images that can be repeated to be forgotten again."¹ And according to Mary Ann Doane, "Television thrives on its own forgetability," relying upon "the annihilation of memory, and consequently of history, in its continual stress upon the 'nowness' of its own discourse."²

These arguments are rooted in Fredric Jameson's contention that in postmodern culture, TV and other visual media have fostered an increasingly "derealized" sense of presence, identity, and history. According to Jameson, history has been supplanted by a proliferation of stylistic pastiche and nostalgia symptomatic of a culture that still desires history, but is capable only of randomly cannibalizing styles and images from the past. Al-

though Jameson rarely targets television as the cause of this affliction, its implication in the visual and industrial culture of late capitalism is unmistakable. Many theorists have characterized TV as a product of its own ideology of liveness and the culture of amnesia in which it exists.³ In spite of the old-fashioned, TV-hating prejudices that still underpin much of the writing about television and the widespread persistence of suspicion toward visual media for the construction of history, it can be argued that TV has modeled highly stylized and creative modes of interaction with the past. Although these modes of interaction are subversive of many of the implicit goals of academic history, they play a significant role in cultural memory and the popular negotiation of the past.

With the erosion of confidence in scientific historiography in recent decades, it has become increasingly acceptable to view cultural relations to the past as overdetermined by the needs of the present, the desires of historians, and the ideological contexts of historical research. Once-solid borderlines separating empiricist history from the idiosyncratic realms of individual and cultural memory now appear dynamic and permeable. Arguments for the inclusion of visual media in historical discourse have developed a certain degree of credibility, even if the precise function and limitations of these media remain open for debate. Though still disparaged for its commercialism and reputed "banalization"⁴ of significant events, television is likewise no longer simply dismissible as a bad object that is irrelevant to the development of historical consciousness. This essay proceeds from these conceptions of TV and history to argue that since its inception, American television has sustained an extremely active and nuanced engagement with the construction of history and has played a crucial role in the shaping of cultural memory.

Reconsidering Cultural Amnesia

Long a troublesome (or, more frequently, dismissed) concept for historians, memory—whether individual or collective—provides a key to theorizing the role of television in contemporary historiography. As theorists of popular memory have argued, history does not end with the production of documents, narratives, or analyses. People consume and process written, filmed, or televised histories within a web of individual and cultural forces that influence their reception and the uses to which they are put.⁵ Further, historical meanings evolve over time, reflecting, among other things, the extent to which our relation to the past is conditioned by present circumstances. As *reception studies* of television have questioned assumptions about the passive spectatorship of TV viewers, *memory studies* provide a way of looking at his-

torical reception, what people remember of history, and the ways it is made useful in their lives.

Like history, cultural memories are produced and must be understood in relation to an array of cultural and ideological forces. As Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright claim, "Memory has a texture which is both social and historic: it exists in the world rather than in people's heads, finding its basis in conversations, cultural forms, personal relations, the structure and appearance of places and, most fundamentally . . . in relation to ideologies which work to establish a consensus view of both the past and the forms of personal experience which are significant and memorable."⁶ This notion of memory as a primarily social rather than individual phenomenon allows for exploration of the ways in which memories are rescripted in order to conform to existing historical narratives. Likewise, Maurice Halbwachs has argued that individual memories are always "interpenetrated" by collective influences, which fill in gaps and ascribe significance to lived experiences.⁷ By situating memory within a complex and fragmentary social milieu, Halbwachs, Bommes, and Wright promote an idea of forgetting that is not merely the opposite of remembering. Indeed, the displacement and reconstruction of individual memories—termed "creative forgetting" by Friedrich Nietzsche and "active forgetting" by Andreas Huyssen—may be viewed as productive and inevitable components of cultural memory. How then can we describe television's role in the production and maintenance of these memories?

In the case of historical events such as the Challenger explosion or the first moon landing, television is widely regarded as an ideal facilitator of cultural memory, with its ritualistic, event-style coverage and capacity for endless repetition. Television is also recognized for its contribution to events that purport to bind the nation together in moments of remembrance and mourning, as seen in the televisus excess surrounding JFK's funeral and the proliferation of programming related to the fiftieth anniversary of World War II. For cultural theorist Marita Sturken, television and other constituents of popular culture are engaged in a relationship of mutual determination—or "entangledness"—with the flow of cultural memory.⁸ Similarly, John Caldwell argues that television may provide viewers with "a great deal of textual and *bioriographic power*, traits not normally associated with the medium in academic accounts that aim to define television's essential qualities—presentness, amnesia, and lack of context."⁹ And in an important challenge to foundational television theory, Mimi White proposes a reconsideration of "liveness" as a structuring principle of TV, arguing that history, banality, and "attractions" offer equally compelling paradigms for understanding television's basic structure:

I want to insist that history, duration, and memory are as central to any theoretical understanding of television's discursive operations as liveness and concomitant ideas of presence, immediacy, and so forth. Indeed, liveness on television is routinely if variously imbricated with, and implicated in, history, momentous events, consumerism, and commodity circulation. Yet to make this claim flies in the face of certain influential theories of postmodernism which propose television as exemplifying, even propagating, the loss of history.¹⁰

Thus, for White, the privileging of liveness is not merely anachronous, but an active and semibarbitrary misconception that perpetuates TV's association with amnesia and ahistoricism. These recent examples notwithstanding, critical work that recognizes the contributions of television to historiography and memory remains a small countercurrent in contemporary scholarship. What is at stake in perpetuating the concept of television as an evanescent, ahistorical medium and memory as an imperfect tool in the service of individual recollection?

Politics of Memory

Memory, like history, is best understood as a site of discursive struggle. And like popular memory, part of the power and significance of televisual historiography lies in its flexibility and intangibility in comparison with "official" histories. Memories, which survive among individuals and communities, are frequently set in opposition to historical discourse, which is propagated from the top down via cultural and governmental institutions. This has proven to be an extremely effective strategy for oral history projects seeking to incorporate marginalized voices—especially those of colonized or disenfranchised peoples—into the official record. Even Michel Foucault argued that popular memory functions as a crucial site of resistance for oppressed groups: "Since memory is actually a very important factor in struggle, if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles."¹¹ Foucault also warned that institutional mechanisms work tirelessly to influence the content and transmission of popular memory: "Now, a whole number of apparatuses have been set up to obstruct the flow of this popular memory . . . [Today there are] effective means like television and the cinema. I believe this is one way of reprogramming popular memory which existed but had no way of expressing itself."¹² Although widely quoted in support of the oppositional relationship between history and memory, these passages by Foucault demonstrate a surprisingly idealized view of preexisting social memories, untainted by the corrupting influence of mass media.

Ironically, nostalgia for authentic, prelapsarian social memories engaged in a David-and-Goliath struggle against official historical discourse implies the existence of precisely the sort of monolithic institutions and centralized apparatuses of social domination to which Foucault is elsewhere famously opposed. This view of popular memory also fails to account for memories that are formed through, rather than in spite of, interaction with "apparatuses" such as TV. A somewhat more modest approach is taken by Michael Frisch, who claims that the significance of popular memories lies not in their authenticity but their functionality: "What matters is not so much the history that is placed before us, but rather what we are able to remember and what role that knowledge plays in our lives."¹³ Popular memory, thus conceived, highlights distinctions between the writing and the relevance of history, while simultaneously providing a crucial link between the two.

On both a personal and cultural level, memories acquire meaning in resonance with other historical constructs (images, narratives, politics, ideology, etc.). Sturken writes that unlike photographs, "Memory does not remain static through time—memories are reshaped and reconfigured, they fade and are rescripted. While an image may fix an event, the meaning of that image is constantly subject to contextual shifts."¹⁴ Thus, the process of understanding how the past is transformed into memory—whether individual or collective—is best described as an archaeology in which the goal is not simply to uncover something that has been buried, but to discover how and why additional layers have been built on top of it. Viewed as a component of cultural memory, the past is less a sequence of events than a discursive surface, readable only through layers of subsequent meanings and contexts. The formation and function of popular memory is thus historically and contextually linked to the exigencies of a given community at a given time.

In a rare example of sociological research on the relationship between TV and cultural memory, Lynn Spigel interviewed a group of undergraduate women at the University of Southern California and discovered that students' belief in the progressive emancipation of women since the 1950s directly corresponded to the consensus view offered by television. Although her subjects claimed to be aware of the pitfalls inherent in basing their knowledge of women's lives during the 1950s on *I Love Lucy* reruns and nostalgic shows like *Happy Days*, Spigel concluded that these women's popular memories served to "discover a past that makes the present more tolerable."¹⁵ Thus, even admittedly unreliable cultural texts such as TV sitcoms gained credibility by virtue of their use-value for women who still experience social discrimination. In considering the relationship between TV and cultural memory, Spigel's research suggests that it is necessary to include historical representa-

tions that make limited claims to authenticity but that may nonetheless profoundly affect people's understanding of the past.

Persistence of Suspicion

Whether or not film and television are fundamentally useful to the needs of historical representation has been the subject of much controversy for historians. Under certain circumstances, film and TV are understood to make a unique contribution to historical discourse because they allow viewers to recover the "liveliness" and richness of the past—to see and feel what it must have been like to be a part of history. On the other hand, film and television are criticized because the stories they tell leave no room for critical interpretation and debate by historians. Each position is predicated upon certain assumptions about what constitutes a work of history and for whom the writing of history is most important. The first suggests that history is primarily the domain of individuals whose relation to the past is formed through identification with naturalistic representations (e.g., period films like *Gandhi* or historical programming like *Roots*). The second emphasizes the curatorship of historians over the past and expresses concern that filmed or televised representations, whether documentary or narrative, are closed systems, which resist the constant need for revision and debate.

This situation is further complicated by the enormous diversity of historical constructions that exist on film and TV, particularly at the extremes of the high/low binary: popular culture and the avant-garde. In a rare attempt to address the significance of some of this work, Robert Rosenstone identifies a mode of "postmodern" visual history that "tests the boundaries of what we can say about the past and how we can say it, points to the limitations of conventional historical form, suggests new ways to envision the past, and alters our sense of what it is."¹⁶ However, Rosenstone limits his analysis to films and videos that share the desire to "deal seriously with the relationship between past and present"¹⁷ as it has been defined by more conventional modes of history. The representational strategies mobilized by "postmodern history" are "full of small fictions used, at best, to create larger historical 'truths,' truths that can be judged only by examining the extent to which they engage the arguments and 'truths' of our existing historical knowledge on any given topic."¹⁸ Thus, Rosenstone essentially makes the argument that certain films and videos may be considered works of history because they try (with varying degrees of success) to do the same things that *real* historians do. "Postmodern histories," though unorthodox, may be recuperated to the extent that they point to histories that are verifiable through traditional means.

Thus, it is ironic that Rosenstone reinscribes these film and video texts, which he labels "postmodern," into a thoroughly modernist (rational, empirical) historical epistemology.

Since the late 1970s, theories of historiography have posed a much more basic challenge to historians whose work rests on the discovery or creation of "larger historical truths." Historiographers such as Hayden White have theorized that the work of the historian is not the transparent chronicling of a preexistent past, but the "employment" of historical information into recognizable narratives and literary tropes.¹⁹ Among other things, these narratives obscure the "discontinuity, disruption and chaos"²⁰ of the past and enable the construction of histories which may be filtered, politicized, or influenced by their relation to systems of authority. Dominick La Capra has further argued that there is no historical "document" that may be considered naive or free of its own historical consciousness. No record of historical events, whether a personal diary or a documentary newsreel, may ever be considered neutral—it is "always textually processed before any given historian comes to it."²¹ Simply put, the truth of history does not exist "out there" (as *The X-Files'* obsessive Fox Mulder maintains) where we can grasp it if we develop the right combination of representational tools and awareness of signifying practices. If we consider history to be constituted through discursive and cultural struggle, then we must look for meaning beyond the "footnotes, bibliography, and other scholarly apparatus" of professional historians to the way historical evidence is culturally processed, disseminated, and remembered.

Television's preoccupation with the past is not limited to overtly historical or nostalgia-oriented programming such as The History Channel, Ken Burns-style documentaries for PBS, or the cable station TV Land (which initially claimed to reproduce entire programming schedules from the 1960s and 1970s, complete with original commercials). History also repeats itself on television in more subtle ways, often in the form of playful or fantastic narratives that may not give the appearance of being "about" history at all. This is particularly evident in the science fiction and time-travel narratives employed by shows such as the various *Star Trek* series of the sixties, eighties, and nineties, *Quantum Leap* (NBC 1989–1993), *Dark Skies* (NBC 1996–1997), and *Timecop* (ABC 1997). A parallel trajectory may be seen in shows such as *You Are There* (CBS 1953–1957) and *Meeting of Minds* (PBS 1977–1981), which employ some of the same implicit historiographical strategies but aspire to explicitly pedagogical modes of address and more traditional standards of historical veracity.

Addressing some of the ways in which TV interacts with, and contributes to, the formation of popular memory, the remainder of this essay focuses on



Bizarre narrative contrivances, such as in the episode "Bread and Circuses," reveal *Star Trek's* obsession with the past, a critically neglected form of historical processing. Courtesy of NBC.

programs that raise questions of historical representation in unexpected ways. The characteristics that unite these shows, rather than their historical accuracy or sincerity of purpose, are such factors as irreverence, creativity, and the willingness to utilize—but also experiment with—historical conventions. Examples are drawn from each of the past five decades, though the threads of continuity connecting them are less dependent upon chronology or historical context than conceptual strategies and expression of shared desires.

Reporting Live from the Past: *You Are There*

In one of television's most remarkable products of the 1950s, the CBS television series *You Are There* offered a striking literalization of the link between TV liveness and history. Adapted from a highly successful radio program of the same name, *You Are There* simulated full-scale, network news reporting from the sidelines of notable historical events such as the Battle of Hastings, the execution of Joan of Arc, and Cortez's conquering of Mexico. The show featured CBS's lead news anchors and reporters (including Walter Cronkite and Mike Wallace) and closely mimicked the structure of a nightly news broadcast, complete with on-the-spot interviews and anchor desk commen-

tary by Cronkite, who orchestrated the incoming reports and provided characteristically reserved commentary. During the broadcast, field reporters ingeniously qualified conflicting historical opinions and disputable facts as being uncorroborated due to the immediacy of the live, breaking event. The show thus merged conventions of historical speculation and investigative journalism, while bringing present sensibilities to bear on the experience of the past.

You Are There created a dynamic and compelling form of "living history" that made good use of the news format's commitment to fairness and objectivity, ostensibly without the benefit of hindsight. In an episode dealing with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, for example, John Wilkes Booth agrees to do a live TV interview from the barn where he has barricaded himself after shooting the president, believing that television will allow him to tell his story to an "impartial witness." Booth speaks rationally of himself as a patriot of the Confederacy, whose actions were justified by a clearly articulated political goal. Supplementary interviews with family members and associates, however, emphasize personal motivations: jealousy of his brothers, desire for personal fame, desperation, or simple lunacy. The multiple perspectives offered by first-person interviews function as a surrogate form of historical analysis, offering precisely the kind of balanced presentation of the facts that links news reporting with more conventional modes of historiography.

Although *You Are There* models a brilliant form of strategic anachrony, the show is structurally configured to reinforce the idea that historical events unfold according to familiar narratives, complete with well-timed elements of drama and suspense. Although such factors undoubtedly contributed to the show's popularity, the opportunity to explore moments of "discontinuity, disruption and chaos" was thereby lost to a false sense of historical closure. From Cronkite's opening intonation that "All things are just as they were . . . except: *You Are There*," to the show's closing reassurance that "all the events reported and seen are based on historic fact and quotation," *You Are There* strove for accuracy and fairness within the limits of accepted historical knowledge and pedagogy.

The desire to see the past through contemporary eyes, evidenced by shows such as *You Are There*, is paralleled by instances in which historical figures travel forward in time in order to observe the present.²² Perhaps the most eloquent example of this was the public television talk show *Meeting of Minds*. Hosted by Steve Allen, *Meeting of Minds* brought together groups of four actors portraying historical figures from various time periods and cultures to discuss contemporary topics and their relation to history. The historical personalities were selected to ensure controversy and debate, with Allen acting



Meeting of Minds, left to right, Irish Liberator Daniel O'Connell, Catherine the Great, Steve Allen, and Oliver Cromwell. Courtesy of PBS.

as moderator and provocateur. Interestingly, the guests on the show spoke not only from their own presumptive historical knowledge, but also as well-informed students of U.S. history, allowing them to make direct comparisons between their own age and the show's present. Thus, for example, the personages of Frederick Douglass and the Marquis de Sade discussed not only the relative merits of bondage and corporal punishment in their own times, but the debates over reform versus punishment in the American penal system of the 1970s. Likewise, when introducing Karl Marx, Steve Allen promised to hold him accountable for the atrocities committed in his name in the Soviet Union. While such transparently contrived and quasi-historical constructs have generally been excluded from discussions of television and history, when taken in combination with the other fantastic scenarios considered here, they indicate a cultural need to imagine a type of history that is productive rather than merely reproductive and, perhaps most importantly, open to interaction with the present.

In its most literal manifestations, this interplay of past and present includes situations in which fictional characters inaugurate "real" historical events. Perhaps the most celebrated cinematic example is Robert Zemeckis's *Forrest Gump*, in which a slow-witted character played by Tom Hanks is



According to *Quantum Leap*'s unique brand of "playful" historical revisionism, Chubby Checker actually learned to do the Twist by watching white time traveler Sam Beckett (Scott Bakula, left). Courtesy of NBC.

digitally composited into archival film images as if he were present at or responsible for historical events such as the desegregation of the University of Alabama and teaching Elvis to dance. Nearly identical scenes occur in another Zemeckis film, *Back to the Future*, including one in which a time-traveling Michael J. Fox teaches Chuck Berry to play rock 'n' roll. And on *Quantum Leap*, Scott Bakula helps to free Martin Luther King's grandfather from slavery and teaches Chubby Checker to do the Twist. Although clearly circumscribed by their fantasy constructs, the frequency with which these fictional scenarios involve white characters taking responsibility for the his-

torical achievements of African Americans underlines only one aspect of the problematic nature of this type of "playful" historical revisionism.

Strange New Worlds, Same Old Sets: *Star Trek*

In the realm of fantastic or alternative histories, few genres open as many possibilities as science fiction. Narrative devices such as the time machine or passage through ruptures in the "space-time continuum" (a recurrent *Star Trek* phenomenon) offer endless opportunities for exploring the past. Other motifs include the scientific experiment that went awry (the pretense of *Quantum Leap*) and the flashback structure (utilized to extreme effect in both the Canadian police/vampire drama *Forever Knight*, and *Highlander: The Series*, in which immortal characters continually revisit events and figures from the distant past). On *Star Trek*, the historical periods reexperienced include such eclectic moments as the gunfight at the O.K. Corral; the outbreak of WWII; the alleged crash landing of an alien spacecraft at Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947; the first U.S. manned space launch; and the computer revolution of the 1980s. Similarly, *Quantum Leap* revisits events such as the U.S. Civil War, the Watts Riots, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Francis Gary Powers U-2 spy incident, the death of Marilyn Monroe, the discovery of Elvis Presley, and the Ali-Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle" boxing match in Zaire.

The extreme diversity and idiosyncracy of these historical moments makes it difficult to define a single unifying characteristic or explanation behind them. However, it is possible to identify certain patterns and repetitions revolving around moments that lack historical closure. Whether due to the magnitude of the trauma or the sheer number of competing theories, an event such as the JFK assassination in November 1963, for example, provides fertile ground for the writing of alternative histories (in addition to Oliver Stone's *JFK*, both *The X-Files* and *Dark Skies* have recast the assassination in terms of government conspiracy and cover-up). However, the significance of such revisionism is not its contribution to a final or even most accurate "truth," but the elaboration and perpetuation of cultural mythologies. Although it is difficult to assess the extent to which this proliferation of counter-narratives affects the functioning of popular memory, the obsessive rewriting and fictionalizing of an historical episode has become part of the way history is written and remembered in contemporary American culture.

The persistent notion that history is open to interpretation and modification is also expressed in a more literal sense in shows that explore the narrative trope of time travel. The *Star Trek* series, for example, have avidly pursued



In the original series *Star Trek* episode "Patterns of Force," the show revisited the trauma of World War II and attempted to explain the logic of Nazism. Courtesy of NBC.

the logic of temporal causality and the possibility of multiple timelines, with deeply conflicted implications for the construction of historical agency.²³ On *Star Trek*, the idea that a single individual may cause dramatic social changes is axiomatic, though it often proves inadvertent. In "Bread and Circuses," for example, a rogue Star Fleet captain is responsible for transforming a planet into a culture of violence based on Ancient Rome, complete with televised gladiator matches. Likewise, in "Patterns of Force," a historian of "ancient" (twentieth century) earth becomes the ruler of a society that he models after Hitler's Germany, citing the efficiency and order of the Nazi regime. And in "City on the Edge of Forever," a lone political activist is responsible for delaying the United States' entry into World War II, the unintended result of which is Nazi domination of the planet. Perhaps as a result, later episodes in the series extend the "prime directive" against interference in developing cultures to include the proscription of actions that alter the past, so that time travel narratives invariably revolve around maintaining or reinstating the status quo.²⁴

In contrast, the NBC television series *Quantum Leap* is more open about its moralistic approach to the rewriting of history. In each episode, the show's

main character, Sam (Scott Bakula) "leaps" uncontrollably from one moment of history to the next, finding himself inside the bodies of various individuals (regardless of gender, age, race, etc.), "driven by an unknown force to change history for the better." Sam is accompanied on his adventures by a holographic companion (Dean Stockwell), who runs computer simulations in order to calculate which alterations to the historical timeline are necessary to "put right what once went wrong" and move on to the next leap/episode.²³ Unlike the typical *Star Trek* historical narrative, which operates on the level of geopolitical or eschatological conflict, *Quantum Leap* deals with more personal struggles (e.g., an African American doctor must survive the Watts riots to help rebuild his community; a boxer must win his last fight in order to finance a chapel for a group of nuns; etc.). On *Quantum Leap*, history is malleable, but only within the constraints of a preexisting master plan, the execution of which is governed by statistical probabilities and the good intentions of white, male scientists.

On repeated occasions, the writers of the original *Star Trek* series sidestep the inconvenience of the show's temporal "prime directive" by concocting scenarios in which the Enterprise crew encounters "strange new worlds" that bear uncanny resemblance to moments in the Earth's past. In various corners of the galaxy, for example, the *Enterprise* deploys its twenty-third-century military technology in the interests of a 1960s political agenda to reform a Chicago crime syndicate ("A Piece of the Action"), oust a corrupt Roman proconsul ("Bread and Circuses"), dethrone a despotic Greek emperor ("Plato's Stepchildren"), and overthrow a proto-Nazi regime ("Patterns of Force"). The frequency of this narrative device was undoubtedly motivated by the show's famously limited budgets and the availability of premade sets and costumes; but it may also be read as a revealing expression of desires to revisit or revise particular moments from the past. The compulsive replaying of Nazi scenarios twenty years after WWII, like the continual reworking of the Kennedy assassination, suggests that one of the roles for these fantastic histories may be therapeutic: the expression—and perhaps ultimate exorcism—of a collective trauma.

Our Future's Happening in Our Past: *Dark Skies*

Perhaps the most overt and self-conscious example of fantastic historiography on American television was the short-lived NBC sci-fi series *Dark Skies*, which reframed nearly every major news event of the post-WWII era in terms of a massive alien invasion. The series premiere of *Dark Skies*, for example, opens with a scene of a Cold War-era fighter pilot in pursuit of an

unidentified flying object over Soviet air space. Shortly after making visual contact, the plane is blown out of the sky, forcing the pilot to eject while the U.F.O. disappears without a trace. A news report on television uses archival footage to reveal that the downed pilot was Francis Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960. Later in the same episode, the aliens (who are linked to a central "hive," bringing super strength and vacant stares to their human host-bodies) are shown to be the cause of several other "real" historical events, including the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of JFK.²⁴ Subsequent episodes deal with events such as the first U.S. manned space flight and the arrival of the Beatles in America, events that resonate powerfully in American cultural memory. The show seamlessly blends archival footage with recreations in creating an amalgam of historical fact and fiction.

Dark Skies' self-consciousness about its alternative historiography is made explicit in an opening credit sequence in which the series' main character intones ominously, "History as we know it is a lie." Promotional materials for the show similarly promise that *Dark Skies* reveals, "The American history you never knew." And according to the show's creators, Bryce Zabel and James Parriott: "This is being presented as alternative history. Everyone has their favorite conspiracies, but we will challenge and expand on those by building a framework that adds consistency to the alien-awareness theories. . . . The series premise is simply this: Our future's happening in our past."²⁵ But clearly this show is not about history in any conventional sense. Nor is *Dark Skies* adequately described as simply a show about memory or nostalgia (though it is both at times). The overriding tone of the show derives from contemporary paranoid and antigovernment conspiracy cultures, bearing an uncanny resemblance to both *The X-Files* and Oliver Stone's *JFK*. However, *Dark Skies'* creators misjudged the extent to which alternative history is rooted in resistant cultural positioning and a kind of homegrown anarchy that is not easily accommodated to network marketing strategies. The very consistency that the show's creators attempted to bring to "alien awareness theories" (still flourishing on the Internet and in subcultural communities) contributed to its downfall. In spite of a seemingly timely premise and NBC's strong commitment to the show, *Dark Skies* delivered consistently poor ratings and was canceled after only one season.

Although it would be possible simply to dismiss *Dark Skies* as a show about neither history nor popular memory, it may also be understood as a text that calls for a more mobile conceptual framework for dealing with the myriad ways in which historical information is culturally disseminated and processed. Although it never connected with the oppositional impulses of its

prospective fan community, *Dark Skies* may be thought of as working with strategies of "creative forgetting."²⁵ Just as experimentation with language displays "the inherent oppressiveness of the symbolic order," histories that are "uncoupled from the instrumental need to signify" may reveal their own kind of creativity and anarchy.²⁶ TV shows such as *Dark Skies* and the historical impulses they manifest serve as indicators of the cultural processing and elaboration to which all types of history are subjected. As such, their significance may be more useful for the creation of a new paradigm of "popular" historical thinking in which once heretical concepts (e.g., that present and past are mutually interdetermined; that time and history are nonlinear and open to multiple interpretations; etc.) are all but taken for granted.

Historical criticism that engages only with those types of historical representation aspiring to conventions of academic historical writing is singularly ill-suited to theorizing many of the "historical" texts and practices that permeate American popular culture. Part of the power of these texts may lie precisely in their incomprehensibility and potential threat to more conventional historical forms, forcing—or allowing—viewers to choose their own path through the massively complex array of historical imagery and ideologies to which they are exposed.²⁷ Rather than simply learning new ways to forget, TV viewers may be acquiring a much more specialized and useful ability—to navigate and remember their own past with creativity and meaning, even when it goes against the design of historians.

Notes

1. Stephen Heath, "Representing Television," in *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990), 279.
2. Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in Mellencamp, 226–27.
3. Jane Feuer's 1983 article "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology" formed the basis for much subsequent scholarship predicated on TV's essential liveness and subsequent ahistoricism. More recently, Anne Friedberg's *Window Shopping* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993) and Lutz Niethammer's *Posthistories* (London: Verso 1992) have offered symptomatic readings of the trivialized persistence of history in contemporary culture. For an excellent critique of prevailing assumptions about TV's ideology of liveness and its implications for historiography, see Mimi White's "Television Liveness: History, Banality, Attractions" in the fall 1999/winter 2000 issue of *Spectator*.
4. Doane, 228.
5. See for example, Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding" in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993), 90–103.
6. Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright, "The Charms of Residence: The Public and the Past," in *Making Histories*, eds., Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz, David Sutton (London: Anchor, 1982), 256.

7. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper and Row), 44.
8. Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 5.
9. John Caldwell, *Televizuality: Style Crisis and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), 166.
10. Mimi White, "Television Liveness: History, Banality, Attractions" in *Spectator* 20, no. 1 (fall 1999/winter 2000), 37–56.
11. Michel Foucault, "Film and Popular Memory," *Edinburgh Magazine* 2 (1977), 22.
12. Foucault, 22.
13. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1990), 16.
14. Sturken, 17.
15. Lynn Spigel, "From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age: Women's Memories and Television Reruns," *Screen* 36:1 (1995), 21.
16. Robert Rosenstone, *Revising History: Films and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), 12.
17. Rosenstone, 3.
18. Rosenstone, 209.
19. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978).
20. Hayden White, 50.
21. Dominick La Capra, *History & Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 34–35.
22. On *Star Trek* this has included a range of figures as diverse as Abraham Lincoln, Genghis Khan, Isaac Newton, Sigmund Freud, Amelia Earhart, Albert Einstein, and Mark Twain.
23. These episodes and many more on subsequent generations of the show may be situated within recent debates over film and history, postmodernism and the proliferation of counterfactual histories in popular culture, from *The X-Files* and *Forrest Gump* to the phenomenally popular literary genre variously known as Alternative History, Counterfactual History, Allohistory, Negative History, or Uchronia. These works may be further located within the context of a general cultural fascination with chaos theory and multiple-world scenarios found in recent movies such as *Sliding Doors* and *Run Lola Run*, each of which explore an alternate sequence of events triggered by a single, seemingly trivial variable.
- However, by far the most sustained investigation of multiple-world phenomena has been articulated by the TV series *Sliders*, which originally aired on and was canceled by Fox only to be picked up by the Sci-Fi Channel following a massive letter-writing campaign by fans of alternate histories. *Sliders* is a science fiction genre show based on the adventures of a pompous professor, a boy genius, a rhythm and blues musician, and a sexy tomboy, all of whom are trapped in a state of interdimensional flux, careening wildly from one parallel universe to the next, trying in vain to return home like the characters on an interdimensional *Gilligan's Island*. Each world visited by this unlikely foursome is similar to our own, except for some more or less significant change in the historical timeline—ranging from a world in which dinosaurs still roam the earth to

one in which J. Edgar Hoover executed a successful military coup following the Kennedy assassination, placing the United States under a perpetual state of martial law enforced by machine gun-toting, cross-dressing government troops known as "skirt-boys."

24. Another particularly overt example of the obsession with historical order within TV science fiction was the short-lived ABC series *Timecop* (1997), in which "temporal criminals" are pursued through history by members of a top-secret government agency known as the Time Enforcement Commission (TEC). The show opens with a warning that "history itself is at risk" from time-traveling villains who revisit notorious historical criminals such as Jack the Ripper and Al Capone. In response, the TEC is enlisted to maintain law and order (principally with regard to property relations) and restore the integrity of the "temporal stream." Apart from its connections to the 1994 movie of the same title, *Timecop* echoes the pursuit through time of Jack the Ripper in *Time After Time* (1979) as well as the long-running PBS children's game show *Where in Time Is Carmen San Diego?*, which pits junior historian-sleuths against a gang of thieves who rampage through time, stealing artifacts and changing history. In each of these cases, the possibility of time travel is conceived simultaneously as a threat to history's "natural" progression and an opportunity to go back and correct errors or transgressions of the past according to a contemporary, enlightened sensibility.

25. These quotations are drawn from the voice-over that accompanies the series' opening credit sequence.

26. According to *Dark Skies*, JFK was killed by a paragovernmental "Black Ops" team when he threatened to expose the alien invasion. Seemingly out of touch with its own irreverence at times, the show goes to extremes to preserve the Camelot mythos, offering repeated assurances that Kennedy was not part of the alien cover-up.

27. NBC *Dark Skies* website.

28. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34.

29. Huyssen, 94.

30. This conception of historically resistant reading is drawn from Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City," from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), an essay that valorizes the navigation of urban spaces in ways that defy the intentions of urban planners. For de Certeau, this "misappropriation" of public spaces constituted a form of resistance to overly prescriptive urban planning.